

# VA Engage Journal

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Volume 8

Article 3

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June 2020

## Confronting an Unprincipled America: Lessons in Leadership from Barack Obama

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### Recommended Citation

Harper, Chloe (2020) "Confronting an Unprincipled America: Lessons in Leadership from Barack Obama," *VA Engage Journal*: Vol. 8 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/vaej/vol8/iss1/3>

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Over the last few decades, the term, “polarization,” in the United States has commonly been used to describe a political divide between Democrats and Republicans at the elite level on specific policy issues (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Iyengar et al., 2019). In the nation today, however, the term has evolved to represent a much deeper divide at the societal level, as the general public is moving towards the extreme ends of the ideological spectrum and moderate voters are disappearing (Schultz, 2018). What is most unique about this current period of political polarization is the accompanying hostility. Not only are Americans disagreeing with those who hold different ideological beliefs, but they are becoming distrustful of, and even aggressive towards, their counterparts (Iyengar et al., 2019). This level of partisan polarization, referred to in the literature as “affective polarization,” is problematic for democracy; it signifies a lack of communication and inability to compromise, and it also means that American norms and values become susceptible to collapse (McCoy et al., 2018). Increased reciprocity of ideas and opinions through engagement in civic dialogue might be useful in decreasing the tension created within a highly polarized society; although, how cooperative the public is in terms of contributing to the national conversation likely depends on the model set by the country’s leaders, the most visible of whom is the president. Jacobson (2016) notes that the informed public—meaning engaged citizens and active voters—tends to reflect the ideological positions of its elected officials. When there is a partisan divide at the elite level, members of the mass public will arrange themselves into different groups whose narrowly defined positions on specific issues align with those of various leaders (Jacobson, 2016). Thus, it is likely that this phenomenon works in reverse, and leaders can mitigate, rather than exacerbate, dissonance among the public. In modern politics, where there is a prominent divide between the left and right, presidents walk a fine line between use of power as force (meaning the role of the president is to simply push a

political party's agenda through) and the use of power to inspire and influence change. This paper analyzes the role of the president in fostering civic dialogue and posits that political polarization at the societal level can be diffused when the president is supportive and can help facilitate productive conversation.

Presidents who promote a national conversation can actually further enhance the discussion by modeling behavior for their subordinates through the practice of ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leaders are distinguished by their commitment to ethical decision-making, which entails prioritizing the needs of the people above personal aspirations, spending time thinking before acting, and attempting to understand differing perspectives (Dobel, 1998). In recent years, the concept of ethical leadership has become so important that many universities now offer undergraduate courses built around this topic. During the summer of 2019, I participated in one such course offered through The College of William & Mary. Co-taught by Professor Andrew Stelljes and former Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and William & Mary alumnus, James Comey, the course, aptly entitled, "Ethical Leadership," challenged me to think critically about the importance of ethical decision-making in both government and the greater professional world. Because of his previous role as the head of a major government agency, Professor Comey was able to provide valuable insights and a unique perspective on what it means to lead ethically. While leadership positions certainly exist outside of the realm of politics, possession of ethical decision-making qualities is especially beneficial—and respected—in government. Each year the University of Illinois recognizes an individual for their commitment to ethical leadership throughout their government career by presenting them with the Paul H. Douglas Award for Ethics in Government (Institute of Government and Public Affairs, n.d.). Nominees may come from any sector of the government, may occupy elected or

career positions, and may receive the award for present or former roles (Institute of Government and Public Affairs, n.d.). Interestingly, the August 2018 recipient was an American president: Barack Obama (Rhodes, 2018).

Obama is remembered as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States and the first African American to hold executive office, but his contributions extend far beyond these titles, and more attention should be given to his ethical use of power, in particular. By the time he took office, Obama had already established a deep understanding of and appreciation for American political culture from his previous public service experience, where he engaged with individual Americans and listened to their stories (Atwater, 2007). The term “culture,” according to Edgar Schein, is quite complex. In his book, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Schein articulates three levels of culture: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions. Artifacts make up the most superficial layer of culture and are represented by the outward characteristics of a group (Schein, 2004). Examples of American artifacts are the flag and the national anthem (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019). The second tier of culture, espoused beliefs and values, occurs because individuals undergo a shared experience (Schein 2004). In the United States, the concept of the “American Dream” might be classified as part of this category (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019). Schein’s final level of culture comes from the underlying assumptions within a society, which are often left unstated and may only be understood with time. Cultures tend to exhibit a misalignment between the first two layers and the underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004). In other words, the way cultures *really* operate often differs from the way they would operate under ideal circumstances (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019). Leaders are useful in such situations because they can mitigate this disconnect; ethical leaders, in particular, demonstrate a

desire to understand all levels of the culture in which they operate, and, over time, they can respond to their cultures and build upon them (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019).

Obama pursued ethical leadership in two major ways. First, he used his strength as a communicator to build a foundation of trust within the culture of his own administration. According to one National Security Council staff member, Obama frequently used sports rhetoric to encourage teamwork among his staff (Brown, 2019). On a national scale, Obama was also successful in forming a rapport with the public, thanks, in part, to his online outreach to individual Americans via email and social media (Stuckey, 2010). Additionally, he had the unique ability of expressing himself eloquently, concisely, and with confidence; he knew how to convey meaning and emphasis by gesticulating often, speaking slowly, and changing the volume and tone of his voice when he wanted to captivate his audience and drive home certain points (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019). It was through his rhetoric and oratory style that he really appealed to the American people and modeled a type of discourse that is rarely seen in times of political polarization.

Even as early as his campaign for the presidency, Obama saw that years of vicious partisanship had enervated Americans, and he employed rhetoric that emphasized the value of bipartisanship and resilience to mitigate this division (Milkis et al., 2012). For example, he adopted the positive slogan, “Yes we can,” on the campaign trail, as a way of galvanizing the American public. In an individualistic society such as the United States, where the society is built around the needs of the individual citizens, finding ways to unify voters is crucial for politicians seeking office at any level of government (Haidt, 2012; Niebuhr, 1932). While group cohesion sometimes enables self-serving individuals to attain benefits for themselves, Jonathan

Haidt (2012) hypothesizes that, in certain situations, individuals are able to “transcend self-interest and lose [themselves] (temporarily and ecstatically) in something larger” (258). This phenomenon is known as the hive switch. Group dynamics are electrifying, and even addictive, and when people feel like they are part of a greater society with a common goal, as Obama made his supporters feel, the group will be more cohesive (Haidt, 2012; Schein, 2004). The hive mentality has important ramifications for democracy and civic discourse. Haidt et al. (2008) contend that such a mindset can lead to greater satisfaction and social engagement among groups. Therefore, an American public with a shared set of goals means more willingness to exchange ideas, which leads to reduced levels of partisanship. Indeed, Obama’s campaign strategy proved successful, and the election saw high voter turnout, more first-time voters, and a general uplifting of spirits (Stuckey, 2010).

While all candidates use catchphrases as a way of distinguishing themselves from a crowded competition, few are able to retain the public’s attention. Obama’s phrase was particularly effective because it appealed to what Haidt (2012) referred to as voters’ “elephants.” Haidt (2012) argues that humans are governed by both automatic processes (immediate, emotional reactions), which he calls “elephants,” and rational cognition, which he calls “riders.” The elephant, comprised of intuition and emotion, tends to dominate and is responsible for our political inclinations. The rider, in contrast, provides the logical counterpart and steers, or navigates for, the elephant, which is already in motion (Haidt, 2012). Obama’s slogan, “Yes we can,” was a call to *collective* action. The word “we,” conveys a desire for the nation to unite, and it simultaneously implies that societal progress cannot be made by an individual actor. By incorporating the public in his vision and demonstrating that he understood their perspective, Obama was able to persuade people to look at the needs of the country from his perspective as

well (Haidt, 2012). Early in his campaign for the presidency, Obama appeared committed to forming a relationship of reciprocity with the mass public; this interest in connecting with Americans is considered an indicator of ethical leadership.

Obama demonstrated promise as an ethical leader in a second way: by being a good listener. In modeling this practice for the nation, he demonstrated the positive role that a president can undertake in an effort to promote civic dialogue. In addition to rhetoric, the way in which a leader comports himself matters. Machiavelli (1532/1999) underscores the importance of conduct and demonstrates that a leader's actions are often more powerful than his words. There is a striking photograph that was taken in the Oval Office while Obama was president that illustrates this point. It is not like ordinary presidential photographs, or even portraits, which frequently reveal little about the subject's personality. Rather, this photograph depicts Obama, in the conventional presidential attire of a suit, bending down so that a little boy can touch his hair. The boy, who is African American, wants to know if the president's hair feels like his own (Calmes, 2012). For any president to physically stoop down to the level of a child is noteworthy, but what makes this particular photograph even more remarkable has to do with Obama's inauguration as the first African American president.

Obama's victory in the 2008 presidential election was a momentous event, considering how much of American culture is, lamentably, mired in a racist past, and his presence in the Oval Office signified great change for the United States and provided hope for our nation to more overtly address racism. The photograph with the little boy remains a powerful image today because Obama's genuine character seems to shine through so clearly, and it is evident that he was a role model, not simply because of the responsibility he held as the first African American president, but because of the way he handled that responsibility, despite the prejudice he

encountered that no president before him had been forced to confront in the same way.

Regardless of one's political leaning, it would be difficult not to be moved by this photograph, as it portrays a powerful message about leadership. Obama did not even have to speak to effectively model the type of culture he wanted to build in both his cabinet and in American society—it was apparent in his body language and reactions, which were captured in photographs by his White House photographer, Pete Souza (Gross, 2017). There are numerous other candid photographs from his time in office where he is shown actively interacting with others, and you can tell he is listening intently because he is leaning into the conversation or smiling in response to what someone else has said. Nevertheless, it may be prudent to weigh these images lightly when forming opinions about a president's leadership style and personality. Gleason and Hansen (2017) consider the significant control of the White House over what images may be released by the media and posit that this power may result in the promotion of a misleading message. In regard to the aforementioned photograph, however, it is difficult to see Obama's interaction with the boy as a staged exchange with a strictly public-facing motive.

Obama's demeanor in the photograph with the little boy not only indicates the way in which body language can be used to convey a message to the public, but it also shows a desire to listen to a diverse selection of voices, a characteristic he began practicing in law school before his political career ever took off and for which he has been frequently praised (Kantor, 2007). Clearly, his posture in that photograph is a response to the child, and it is telling that Obama chose to turn his attention to the boy, rather than the adults in the room. Pete Souza explained this moment well, saying, "I think a lot of young African-American kids probably could identify with that moment. But it also says something about President Obama that at the behest of this innocent question from this kid, that he was fine bending over to let this kid touch his head"



(Gross, 2017). Obama's action demonstrates a level of humility—while he holds a position of immense power, he is not above anyone. During his time in the White House, Obama engaged in active listening to foster an environment of trust with those immediately surrounding him, as well as with the nation as a whole (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019). Even when he did not necessarily have a true friendship with an individual in his cabinet, he strove to develop a professional relationship. His invitation to Hillary Clinton to serve as Secretary of State reflects his willingness to work across differences, and listening would have been central to making their relationship work. The discussion between the two individuals surrounding Clinton's job offer was probably awkward, at best, considering Obama had won the Democratic nomination for president over her, and his action demonstrated his willingness to work with, encourage, and listen to someone with whom he had previously been in conflict. Perhaps he never achieved the same level of friendship with Clinton as he did with others in his cabinet, but from a public perspective, they had a functional professional relationship. Ethical leadership requires a leader to be open to other ideas, and to the American public, Obama's appointment of Clinton to a visible role that emphasized her strengths as a politician, suggested humility.

In my summer class at William & Mary, we discussed how, in order to mold the right kind of people to help lead the nation, presidents must create a comfortable, yet motivational environment. They can do so by finding the right balance between four qualities: kindness, toughness, confidence, and humility (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019). We concluded that listening plays a crucial role in striking this balance because every perspective offered has the potential to reflect some version of the truth (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019). From a public standpoint, Obama appeared successful in

shaping a positive culture in his cabinet. One of the key relationships that the media followed throughout his presidency was his professional and personal bond with Joe Biden. The two were known to be close friends, even though they had previously been competitors, and they were often described as having a sibling-like relationship (Shear, 2017). Biden's appointment to the vice presidency indicated that Obama respected him enough to undertake huge responsibility, and it also showed that, as the president, he would support Biden and take pride in his accomplishments in that position. In class, Professor Comey likened the president's position to that of a sports coach, arguing that a leader must have high standards and a desire to see those beneath them succeed. Obama's friendship and professional relationship with Biden, from a public perspective, certainly seemed to embody this concept.

Obama's willingness to learn from others again shows that he recognized the value of a collective effort, as he did early in his campaign when he created the conditions for a hive switch to occur with his rhetoric. Abramsky (2009) notes that Obama actually garnered support from conservatives when he was running for president because they respected him and saw his ability to listen as a sign of his willingness to negotiate. As a leader, active listening is an important precursor to making ethical decisions—without it, leaders work with limited information and can miss entire perspectives. True listening requires being silent and consciously processing what another person says before showing encouragement and interest through body positioning, use of gestures, or even subtle noises (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019). Furthermore, good listening indicates a willingness to collaborate with others (Slater, 2008). Productive conversations happen when group members understand the strengths and weaknesses of one another, in addition to those of the collective group (Schein, 2004). Effective communication requires being able to accept diversity. A leader, such as Obama, who creates an

atmosphere that encourages honesty and even disagreement, “flattens the hill,” meaning he minimizes the distance between himself and his subordinates, making communication more direct (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019). This idea of flattening the hill is promising for civic dialogue because individuals who feel their opinions are of value will be more willing to participate.

Presidents who seek to facilitate a nationwide conversation will only be able to do so if the public trusts they are making levelheaded decisions when it comes to their policy agenda. As Americans, we want to see our interests represented, and we appreciate leaders who work for the common good, rather than for their own interests. Like every president before him, Obama made decisions that were contentious and made many mistakes, but when he first took office, he assured his constituents that he would seek to maintain transparency and a standard of ethics in his administration (Stolberg, 2009). To what degree he lived up to his promise is an ongoing debate; some argue that he failed miserably, while others are more optimistic (Arnold, 2015). Critical decisions from Obama’s policy record include the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (colloquially known as Obamacare), the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program (DACA), and the assassination of al Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden.

Obama signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010, in an effort to make health insurance more widely available and affordable by providing subsidies to low-income households (U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, n.d.). Access to good healthcare is considered a basic human right under Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “[e]veryone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services” (U.N. General Assembly, n.d.). Given this definition,

Obama's decision to expend tremendous amounts of political capital in an attempt to expand access to healthcare in the United States demonstrates a desire to provide for the common good. As a Democrat, Obama believed that individuals can have access to better resources when a large-scale government program provides them, and Obamacare was his way of ensuring that Americans who might not have otherwise had the means could benefit.

Another important moment of Obama's presidency was the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. This program made it possible for immigrants who had come to the United States as children to apply for, and renew, deferred action. The term "deferred action" means that a decision regarding the status of an illegal immigrant who resides in the U.S. will be made at a later date, and all possibility of deportation is halted. This policy addressed the needs of immigrants without legal immigration standing, which was a point of controversy. Obama installed this program without the support of Congress, which had consistently rejected it based on doubts surrounding its constitutionality (Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). Whether or not it was ethical to introduce such a program in the manner that Obama introduced DACA is debatable, but Obama argued that the concept of welcoming immigrants is not only a matter of ethics, but it upholds the ideal of the American Dream. DACA was highly contentious when it was first implemented, perhaps indicating that immigration policy symbolizes a misalignment between our espoused beliefs and values and our underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004). The United States was founded by immigrants, and we have long embraced the idea of "the melting pot," but Americans have very different opinions about the ethics of the process through which immigrants can achieve citizenship status. These varying opinions caused a substantial and longstanding controversy among lawmakers and

among the public, making the DACA program one of the most significant markers of Obama's policy legacy.

Perhaps even more complex than immigration reform, at least in terms of its ethical implications, was the successful operation to assassinate al Qaeda leader, and the mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Osama bin Laden, whose death marked another pivotal event that defined the Obama administration. Bin Laden's death was viewed as a victory in the Western world, and those who carried out the military operation were seen as heroes. In his announcement to the American people, Obama said "his demise should be welcomed by all who believe in peace and human dignity" (Phillips, 2011). In choosing to kill a highly dangerous fugitive, Obama fulfilled his promise to protect our nation, and his action was seen as necessary by a large majority of the American public. One of the challenges with this particular case is the fact that it involved a human life. Can murder really be considered an ethical action? Michael Walzer has emerged as a strong voice in the study of just and unjust war. Notably, he argues that in conflict, both sides share the right to kill (Walzer, 2015). The example of bin Laden's assassination is one that can be perceived as being ethical and unethical simultaneously, but it is worth thinking about as leaders must sometimes make decisions that do not fully align with their own personal beliefs simply because it is their duty to those they lead. Whatever Obama may have believed, personally, he set aside in order to accomplish what he perceived to be in the best interest of the nation. The emotional and economic turmoil of 9/11 had ushered in a new era in American society: the so-called "war on terror." Successfully carrying out the mission to kill bin Laden was a symbolic and literal victory nearly ten years in the making; it reaffirmed the strength of American ideals and gave the nation hope (Rhodes, 2020).

Towards the end of his presidency, *The New York Times* published an opinion piece with responses from readers about their impressions of Obama as a leader. To be sure, readers disagreed over the efficacy of specific policies that he established, but few failed to remark on his strength of character. One woman, who identified herself as white woman from the South and a former member of the Republican party, described Obama as “the most ethical, brilliant, caring president in [her] lifetime” (Brooking, 2017). This woman’s response is particularly striking because it illustrates the power of good leadership in democratic society. If someone whose values were initially juxtaposed with those of her president can come to recognize that ethical leadership transcends policy outcomes, then Obama must have been doing something right. Obviously, he was elected as a Democratic president, and many of his actions in office were characteristic of a liberal agenda, but one of his strengths was his ability to connect with others who may not have held his same beliefs—he may have disagreed with someone, but he could still be kind (Brooks, 2019).

Obama sought to understand people. He managed the government, but he led the country (J. Comey & A. Stelljes, personal communication, July 2019). Power, even when used for good, leads to inequality, and yet, it is impossible to avoid because in order to attain unity within a social group, there must be a widespread acceptance of ideas imposed by a more powerful group (Niebuhr, 1932). In our nation, the onus falls on presidents to reconcile this discrepancy and attempt to reach a state of peace and justice for all. There will always be an ideological divide between our two main political parties, but good presidents should be able to unite the public because they understand how to appeal to their fellow Americans. More important, good presidents are able to build a national identity by positively influencing civic dialogue. Obama’s approach to government was effective because he was able to unite the nation without raising his

voice. In the U.S., the democratically elected government cannot exert violent force over its citizens to get them to conform to their political demands, but presidents *can* choose to lead loudly and make the presidency a spectacle. To the American people, such behavior would be perceived as a dominating force similar to that which Niebuhr (1932) remarks upon. The current president, Donald Trump, has selected a leadership style closer to the latter, and his strategy has actually caused the public to stop listening (Drezner, 2019). Trump has, however, had a similarly profound influence over political dialogue at the societal level, as Obama did (Pew Research Center U.S. Politics and Policy, 2019). Where the public continues to pay attention is on Twitter, a platform which the current president relies on to an unprecedented extent as a form of communication. His use of social media has prompted individuals to assert their raw opinions, as many Americans similarly rely on social media platforms to remain politically informed. According to Ott (2017), however, this heightened online activity does not actually promote civic discourse; instead, it actually eliminates deliberation within the electorate and allows hostility to fester within an increasingly unrestrained public. In this sense, negative political discourse is a threat to democracy. The line between positive and negative public discourse is narrow, and it is the president's job as a leader to decide where that line falls.

When Obama was president, he captured the nation's attention through compelling, positive rhetoric (Atwater, 2007), and his presidency was marked by a desire, consistent with Niebuhr (1932), to serve the interests of the country over himself. In recent years, we have heard little from Obama, who was widely recognized as an eloquent public speaker throughout his political career (Allen & Flynn, 2016). As the tone of the nation has become increasingly hostile, it is important that we understand the significance of a president striving to be ethical for the way in which civic discourse develops. Obama's thoughtfulness, rationality, and candor in his

decision-making approach were valuable assets for the role of President of the United States (Pfiffner, 2011). Ethics in government is a concept that most Americans are familiar with, and even inherently understand, but too often, we struggle to recognize when an ethical decision-maker is before us. Now, with the gift of hindsight and a different presidential administration in office, our understanding of Obama's leadership has come into relief.

### **Conclusion**

One of the lessons that resonated with me from my Ethical Leadership class at William & Mary is that you can view someone as an ethical leader, even if you disagree with their decisions. I certainly do not idolize Obama, but I respect him. He was willing to listen to the public, and in that way, he encouraged Americans to engage in civic discourse. We need more leaders like Obama, who are willing to listen and respond thoughtfully. Only then will we be able to hold a productive national conversation. Leadership forms culture, and culture grows when it is passed on. *Ethical* leadership is something that must be cultivated over time, and it is a skill best learned from those to whom we look for help. While Obama is no longer in office, he left an impression on the nation by creating a culture of transparency, and if enough people cling to that model, we may be able to return to—and build on—his vision of America.



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